

Pioneer Press, December 16, 2004

Fort Sheridan housing may be able to generate more than \$1 million of new property tax revenue to help educate children, based on discussions between city and military officials.

Efforts by officials to recover costs for public services supplied to Fort Sheridan military personnel may result also in new revenue for park districts and for police and fire services. Education reimbursements, however, will continue to lag behind actual costs. In addition, efforts to secure bluffs and ravines as public space on Fort property have been strengthened by recent survey work completed for the Openlands Project of Chicago.

U.S. Rep. Mark S. Kirk, R-10th, of Highland Park presented housing and property tax data to Highwood, Highland Park, Lake Forest and Glenview municipal officials Friday morning. They discussed revenue to be generated by reconstruction of 330 housing units at Fort Sheridan by the U.S. Navy as well as other concerns.

A public-private partnership implemented by the Navy to improve the quality of its housing for military personnel at Fort Sheridan and in Glenview will place newly constructed structures on the tax rolls. In addition, 51 acres at Fort Sheridan and 38 acres in Glenview will be transferred to civilian use and subject to local zoning and other development controls. Military housing will be in Highwood, and 51 acres of new housing will be in Highland Park.

Approximately 330 homes will be added to the tax rolls, but the Navy will continue to own the land.

Kirk estimated tax revenue for Highland Park and Highwood would rise from \$185,727 to \$1,383,682, a 645 percent increase. Much of this funding will go toward educating children from military families but also will pay for park, police and fire services.

"The financial benefit to the schools is considerable," said Kirk.

However, North Shore School District 112 officials, who have not been part of face-to-face discussions on Fort development issues and impacts, said that the proposals may in fact represent a capital and operating loss for the district because of the need to build and operate a new school.

In 2004, North Shore School District 112 reported that it received \$777 to educate each child of military families. However, the district spends \$10,907 to educate each child in the district. If all the estimated new tax revenue went to the school district, and none were allocated for police, fire or park services, the funds to educate military children would increase to about \$7,730, still about \$3,000 less than current costs.

Kirk told local officials that military housing at Fort Sheridan will increase by one unit to 330, and all will be built as new housing and on the tax rolls. The Navy will retain ownership of the land on which the homes are built.

"There was great fear that the numbers were much higher," he said.

Although the number of military housing units will be 330, the effect will be much greater since about 60 percent of the homes are now empty. Once all 330 units are occupied, more military families will live in Highwood and Highland Park. Military personnel will pay property taxes on the home because they will own them, whereas before they were owned by the military.

The response of local officials has been positive, but cautious, as they review the new information.

District 112 Superintendent Maureen Hager said some of the information appears to be an improvement, but much more work needs to be done.

"I would describe our reaction as cautious, and we are in need of more information before we can feel confident that we can address the educational needs of students generated from these

developments," Hager said.

The new proposal "does not address our need for a parcel of land and impact fees to build a school to accommodate the increased enrollment that will occur," she said Tuesday morning.

Hager said city officials have been wonderful at keeping District 112 informed about meetings with Kirk and the Navy. However, she is unclear about why there are no direct discussion which include District 112.

"I would hope that would change," she said.

Highland Park Mayor Michael D. Belsky said Monday he was not yet sure if this proposal provides adequate funding for schools.

"In Highland Park and Highwood, there is a high value on education. People are willing to pay for quality education," he said.

Belsky said Kirk will continue to work on special legislation for additional impact aid to bridge gaps between tax revenue generated and educational costs. Belsky agreed one outstanding issue continues to be the potential need for a new school building for District 112.

Highwood Mayor John P. Sirotti said, "The Congressman got involved and that's a positive step. The Congressman was upfront and honest."

Sirotti based his evaluation on reports by City Attorney Paul Diambri, City Administrator Marc Huber and First Ward Alderman Charles Pecaro who attended the meeting.

Highland Park Assistant City Manager Pat Brennan said it was too early to form an opinion on

the proposal but praised the opportunity for city staff to meet with private sector developers to give them information needed to prepare a suitable proposal for Navy review in mid-January. That information has been assembled and will soon go to all developers submitting proposals, Brennan said.

City staff will discuss open space, zoning, beach access, infrastructure improvements and school issues when meeting with developers.

Park District of Highland Park Executive Director Ralph Volpe said Kirk's involvement will have a positive benefit for the community and Fort Sheridan.

"It looks like a plan has been initiated and we're certainly glad that Kirk is acting on our behalf. We look to have park and recreational services and open space available for the families in the Fort Sheridan area," Volpe said.

Other than the progress about housing and education cost impacts, Kirk said he also is pleased with agreements related to bluff and ravine area protection as well as access to the lakefront.

"I'm an environmentalist, and that's why creating a new shoreline park is so important to me," he said.

Kirk said the Openlands Project will prepare an environmental evaluation as well as a survey of the boundary of the open space donation by the Navy. The environmental survey identified five endangered species. Kirk said Highland Park and some Lake Forest families had raised the \$150,000 needed by the Openlands Project to do that work.